Schooling Experience of Latino Immigrant Adolescents in North Carolina: An Examination of Relationships between Peers, Teachers, Parents and School

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A thesis submitted to the faculty of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Masters of Arts in the School of Education.

Chapel Hill

2010

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Abstract

Matthew Michael Green: Schooling Experience of Latino Immigrant Adolescents in North Carolina: An Examination of Relationships between Peers, Teachers, Parents and School.

(Under the direction of Lynda Stone)

This study uses the LAMHA project qualitative interview data as a secondary data set to examine twenty adolescent Latino youth's school experiences in North Carolina. The study examines how Latino immigrant youth (a) construct their understanding of self and peer identities and the factors contributing to this construction, (b) describe teacher–student relationships together with the factors that mediate whether students have positive or negative teacher-student relationships, and (c) how immigrant youths' parents experience the relationship and involvement with their child's school, parental beliefs about education and factors that enable or inhibit engagement with their child's education. Findings indicate that race, ethnicity and cultural distinctions are leading factors in construction of self and peer identification. Relations between students and teachers are heavily mediated by teacher adaptation to students' differences. Parental engagement is largely a product of financial and language resources made available to them for enabling their involvement.

Acknowledgements

The LAMHA project was funded by a grant from the William T. Grant Foundation and directed by Krista M. Perreira and Mimi V. Chapman. Persons interested in obtaining LAMHA contract use data should see http://www.cpc.unc.edu/projects/lamha for further information. Thank you to Krista Perreira for her help, guidance and for providing access to the Latino Adolescent Migration Health Adaptation study qualitative data. Without her this project would not have been possible. Also, thank you to Linda Ko for her initial review and coding of the LAMHA qualitative interviews utilized in this study.

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LAMHA	Latino Adolescent Migration, Health and Adaptation
USA	United States of America

Chapter 1

Introduction

North Carolina's Spanish-speaking population has grown extensively throughout the last fifteen years, and this Latino immigrant influx has led the state to be labeled as an "Emerging Gateway State" by many researchers (Singer, 2004; Anrig & Wang 2006). The term comes from the identification of previous immigrant hot spots, including Florida, Texas, California and New York, as doorways into the United States. According to 2000 U.S. Census data (Malone, Baluja, Costanzo, & Davis, 2003), North Carolina has experienced a 273% increase in foreign-born population. Fifty-six percent of the immigrant population in North Carolina is from Latin American countries, and seventy-one percent of this population is from Mexico (Malone et al., 2003).

Understanding how immigrant students experience education in North Carolina is important because our education system affects this population. With the growing number of Latino immigrants, it is important to examine this population specifically in order to better understand the experiences and difficulties this population encounters in the school systems. Schools represent a unique institution where immigrant students often have their first interactions with American peers. The institution of a school is unique because it represents an intersection of politics, economics, culture, language, religion and race. Schools are arenas that allows for interaction between public and private social spaces. Reflecting their

own histories and life experiences, students bring personal contexts with them to school. The schooling experience of immigrants can have a negative affect both socially and academically.

I arrived at this study motivated by my interest in the question of how immigrant students experience schooling and what might be the impact that experience has on their development of a social identity. My approach to this issue is informed through educational, sociological and political perspectives, as well as from personal experience. Teaching for two years in a foreign country, I was myself an immigrant and taught many immigrant students. This initial experience first prompted my interest in how immigrant students experience schooling. Moreover, I now understand that the interaction between native students and immigrant students is not a phenomenon unique to the United States.

Understanding the social and political impact of schooling, I am interested in examining the effects of the education system on people who have only recently arrived in the United States, and who must navigate the country's social, political, racial and economic spheres for first time. I am specifically interested in examining how the schooling experience of immigrants affects the formation of ethnic, racial and national identities, how these identities are moderated and how memberships to social spheres are influenced by identity formation.

This study examines how Latino adolescent immigrants construct their understanding of self and peer identities, their relationships with their teachers and the relationships their parents have with their children's schools. The experiences of immigrant youth that dictate

their understanding of these relationships occurs within the daily interactions of students, teachers, families and schools.

What are the factors that contribute to understanding these relationships and the construction of identities? This paper will begin by examining relevant literature of prior research. The literature review examines previous literature about Latino assimilation in schools, immigrant identity formation, creation and maintenance of ethnic identities, and theoretical concepts regarding the construction of cultural, ethnic and racial identities. The review goes on to examine the impact and research regarding the relationships between Latino immigrant students and teachers, as well as the role parents play in the education and schooling of their children. Following this review I will describe the data used in this study, how it was obtained, the collection methodology, participant demographics and analytic methodology. This section will illuminate the research process and provide information about the data used. The results section will describe the analysis and detail the experiences of the participants. The findings will describe how immigrant youth construct their own personal identity. Specifically, I will report how the understanding and construction of peer identities influences the development of a personal identity. Finally, the discussion section examines the findings within the context of previous research, and the conclusion includes limitations of the research and future research implications.

Chapter 2

Literature Review and Theoretical Considerations

When examining experiences of immigrant students, a popular approach has been to examine how immigrants assimilate into a society. Assimilation can broadly be defined as the process in which immigrants are incorporated and come to understand their incorporation into American society socially, politically, ethnically and racially. Acculturation is defined as the process of cultural exchange between different groups as they come in contact with one another over a period of time. Immigrant assimilation has also been explored through a multitude of areas. For example, how immigrants acquire and use social capital (Noguera, 2004), additive acculturation of immigrant populations (Gibson, 1995) and "Americanization" of immigrants (Olsen, 1996) have all been examined for their impact on the assimilation and development of immigrant identity and academic success. Valenzuela (1999) identified and chronicled the "subtractive" assimilation and marginalization that many Latino immigrant students face throughout their schooling experiences.

a. Ethnic Identity

As immigrant students develop a personal identity within the context of a schooling environment, they can undergo a transformation from a singular country-of-origin identity to a pan-national identity and/or to a broader ethnic or racial identity (Olsen, 1996; Rong, 2002; Waters, 1994). Immigrant students expand their sense of community, nation, family and

identity to include those who come from the same region or those who share culture (Brittain, 2002). Immigrants may enter a school with a single ethnic or national identity; however, through peer interaction, they may become stratified and grouped with others holding similar cultural characteristics as identified by themselves and their peers. Schools play an important mediating role in the creation of an identity that incorporates some divergence from a host country's national identity (El-Haj, 2007).

The strength of an immigrant student's ethnic identity is determined by a confluence of factors. For example, Phinney (2001) identifies parental cultural maintenance, ethnic language proficiency and peer group interactions as determining factors for the development and maintenance of ethnic identity in immigrants, with peer group interaction having the strongest influence. These findings are supported by Umana-Taylor and Fine (2004), who argue that ethnic identity is directly influenced by familial socialization. The influence of family on immigrant youth's creation of ethnic identity is well documented. Latino immigrants with a stronger sense of ethnic identity tend to have high academic motivations and positive school views (Perriera et al., 2010). Furthermore, student peer networks and social groups largely influence school engagement and positive academic behavior in Latino students (Montes, 2007; Ream & Rumberger, 2008). The ethnic identity of Latino youth has been found to be mostly formed by late adolescence with little change occurring thereafter for ethnic or racial identity (Ontai-Grzebik & Raffaelli, 2004; Phinney, 1989, 1990, 1992). Furthering the research on ethnic and racial identification of immigrant youths, my proposed study attempts to identify the role that peers and peer identification play in the constructions of ethnic identities in relation to both the immigrants and how they perceive others.

b. Identity Formation

In the classic model of assimilation, research on immigrant experiences in schooling often focuses on how immigrants adapt to new social and academic environments in a linear fashion. Typically, immigrants undergo adaptation incrementally as they move from patterns of different and distinct to patterns more similar to and fully assimilated to social norms. Some research has examined segmented models of assimilation that acknowledge a variety of pathways for immigrant assimilation (Portes & Zhou, 1993; Rumbaut, 1994). Research has often overlooked how ethnic perceptions by peers create ethnic and racial identities for immigrants. According to Ogbu's (1983, 1987) cultural-ecological explanation of minority school performance, the way in which an immigrant assimilates and creates an identity is dependent on the type of immigrant and minority he or she is perceived to be. Minority groups are stratified into different status and class groups based on how they immigrated and how society perceives their racial and ethnic group.

Alba (2005) observes that the schooling environment of immigrant students has a distinct effect by sometimes creating "blurred" or "bright" boundaries. Blurred boundaries lessen the distinctions between immigrants and native students, whereas "bright" boundaries make cultural traits explicit, thereby elevating the possibility for segregation between immigrants and native students. Alba explains: "One way that boundary blurring can occur is when the mainstream culture and identity are relatively porous and allow for the incorporation of cultural elements brought by immigrant groups" (p. 25). High or low

academic engagement and school success have been strongly linked to the experience of integration or isolation, respectively, of immigrant youths (Conchas, 2001).

Immigrant students and their ability to belong to, participate in and identify with certain groups can be examined in terms of their inclusion or exclusion from specific groups based on specific cultural traits. Ong (1996) terms this concept of "belonging" as "cultural citizenship:" "Cultural citizenship is a dual-process of self-making and being-made within webs of power linked to the nation-state and civil society" (p. 738). This dual process of self-making and being made means that assimilation is not solely an act of acquiring characteristics and traits to become similar to others, but it is also a process of having an identity attributed to you. Institutions of civil society, such as schools, play a key role in the development of personal identity, belonging and identity in relation to peers. Ong goes on to explain:

> instilling proper normative behavior and identity in newcomers must also be taken up by institutions in civil society. For instance, hegemonic ideas about belonging and not belonging in racial and cultural terms often converge in state and non-state institutional practices. (1996, p. 738)

El-Haj (2007) further explains the role of schools as an institution. "Schools play important roles in the construction of the symbolic boundaries of the nation – in constructing who is and is not a member of the nation – and in the provision of resources with which immigrant youth learn to belong to and navigate their new society." When "bright" boundaries exist, immigrants often speak of national and cultural citizenship, membership and national identity in terms of "them," reinforcing the understanding that they as immigrants are not included in the community (El-Haj, 2007; Levinson, 2007). Suárez-

Orozco and Suárez-Orozco (1995) have explored the problematic effects of English language acquisition in Spanish-speaking Latino immigrants stating:

> To give up Spanish to acquire English represents a symbolic act of ethnic renunciation: it is giving up the mother tongue for the instrumental tongue of the dominant group...in such contexts, when learning the language and culture of a dominant group is symbolically equated with giving up one's own ethnic identity. (p. 75)

The creation of ethnic and racial groups reinforces the symbolic boundaries of distinction between peers, making it difficult for immigrant students to successfully assimilate and possess membership to groups of privilege unless they are granted that privilege by those within the group. Latinos living in the United States are consistently seen as less American than their Caucasian Americans counterparts, thereby highlighting the dissociation between ethnic and national identities (Devos, Gavin, & Quintana, 2010).

c. Student-Teacher Relationships

For immigrants, schools are often a place where the existing social and economic inequalities they experience daily in American culture are reproduced and reinforced. However, teachers can play an important role in helping immigrant students succeed or fail in the classroom. The student-teacher relationship is an important part of the schooling experience for immigrant students. Students and teachers interact with each other on a daily basis at school, and teachers are representative of education and learning to the students. When teachers provide effective collaboration and access to institutional resources for Latino students, the students develop a sense of social belonging and academic success (Conchas, 2001).

However, not all teacher-student interactions produce positive benefits for the students. Immigrant students often deal with discrimination by peers and teachers as part of their schooling experience. Perceived discrimination among peers and from teachers is often mediated by ethnicity and a student's ethnic identity, as occurs for example when Latino and Black students perceive higher levels of discrimination among teachers than other minority groups (Greene,Way, & Pahl, 2006; Rosenbloom & Way, 2004). Research into the interaction between immigrant students and teachers has focused on immigrant academic success and issues of discrimination by teachers.

d. Parent Involvement

Immigrant parents' adaptation to new environments is a vitally important aspect of migration for families. Parents must learn to navigate new societies and to utilize resources for familial benefit. One of the most important social resources in America is the local school system. Immigrant parents often experience barriers to their involvement in the education of their children, and as a result they feel alienated from the education process and the schools their children attend. Barriers that minimize or inhibit parental involvement often include time, conflict with work, language, feeling like an outsider and money (Carreon, Drake, & Barton, 2005; Salinas Sosa, 1997). These barriers exist despite immigrant parents' desire to participate in their children's educational and schooling experiences.

Dumka, Gonzales, Bonds, and Millsap (2009) have examined the positive link between immigrant parental practices and cultural orientation on academic outcomes in their children, as well as the differential influence that mothers and fathers have on adolescent children. Immigrant parental education attainment and a greater emphasis on education achievement by immigrant parents are both related to higher achievement in immigrant

children (Fulingi, 1997; Fulingi, 1998). For example, Goldenberg, Gallimore, Reese, and Garnier (2001) have found that immigrant parents tend to maintain high academic aspirations regardless of their children's academic performance. However, Goldenberg et al. (2001) also found that parental expectation of academic achievement does not influence student school performance, but student performance does influence parental academic expectations. Immigrant parents also have greater expectations for their children to attend college in comparison to American-born parents of the same ethnicity (Fulingi, 1997). Immigrant parents are also less likely to engage in learning activities outside of formal schooling with their children, but are more likely to allow space for homework, talk to their children's teacher and attend parent-teacher conferences (Fulingi & Fulingi, 2007). The existing literature provides a consistent picture of the emphasis and value immigrant parents place on their children's education.

By examining the Latino Adolescent Migration, Health and Adaptation (LAMHA) project qualitative interviews, several implications could be drawn about how first-generation adolescent Latino immigrants in North Carolina experience schooling, teachers, peer groups and the construction of their own identity. Consequently, twenty qualitative interviews from the LAMHA project were examined for information about how Latino youth interpret their experiences between peers, schools and teachers. The Latino immigrant youth's ethnic identity in this study originated from the interplay of their strong identifying bond with their country of origin, their native language, their peer social group interactions (in group and out of group) and their experiences regarding race and ethnicity in the United States. Sixteen of the students who participated in the qualitative interviews are from Mexico. However, the

sample represents a range of economic, racial and ethnic backgrounds with varying lengths of time spent in the United States.

Chapter 3

Methodology and Demographics

a. Data

This study used data from the qualitative portion of the Latino Adolescent Migration, Health and Adaptation (LAMHA) study that was collected between November 2005 and March 2006. Around that time, immigrant youth were becoming a stronger presence in North Carolina's school system. The LAMHA project was designed to examine the migration and acculturation experiences of Latino youth and their families in North Carolina. Because the schooling experience is an essential component of the acculturation experience of youth, the qualitative interviews explored many aspects of the schooling experience. The LAMHA study used a mixed methods approach that incorporated survey data on 283 twelve to nineteen-year-old first-generation immigrant Latino adolescents and their primary care givers. First-generation immigrants in this study were defined as foreign-born youth with foreign-born parents. The study presented here relied on the qualitative data to provide richer descriptions than survey-based instruments of interactions between adolescent immigrants and peers, teachers and parents during their schooling experience. Using the in-depth interviews with adolescents, I (1) identified how Latino immigrant youth view their experiences in relation to the construction of self and peer identities, (2) examined the factors that influence their relationship with and perception of teachers, and (3) explored how parents and family engage and support the schooling and education of their children and the

obstacles created by schools. This study was approved by the UNC Institutional Review Board, and data were maintained in a secure database at the Carolina Population Center.

Of the 283 youth who completed the LAMHA survey, twenty first-generation immigrant youth in North Carolina were interviewed. These youth were between the ages of fourteen and eighteen and lived in nine different school districts, each of which had at least 5,000 Latinos and a Latino population that had grown by at least 400% between 1990 and 2000. In these school districts, at least one male and one female participant was interviewed. Thirteen of the participants attended schools in urban school districts, and seven attended schools in rural districts. Participants were interviewed in their homes by one of two bilingual research associates (not the author). Eleven interviews were conducted primarily in English, and nine were conducted primarily in Spanish.

b. Interviews

Qualitative interviews focused on the following five topics: pre-migration experiences, migration experiences, post-migration experiences, ethnic identity and acculturation. Interviewers were given a list of possible concepts under each topic area to probe during the interview (see Appendix A). Additionally, they had an interview script to help ensure that the interviews provided in-depth detail about the experiences of the immigrant youth. The interviews were conducted as a part of the original LAMHA project and no interviews were conducted as part of this data analysis. Each of the five topics was designed to elicit information about different aspects of their life and experiences. Questions about pre-migration were designed to understand the interviewee's lives before moving to the United States; migration questions were designed to understand the experiences during

migration; the post-migration experience section was designed to identify the challenges faced and how these challenges were dealt with. Along with detailing immigrants' migration experiences, questions on ethnic identity and acculturation were asked to understand what racial and ethnic labels used in the United States meant to the interviewees.

The interviews were conducted in English or Spanish, depending on the participant's preference. After the interviewees were given a chance to select their own pseudonym, the interview began and lasted one-and-a-half to two hours. Participants often changed languages during the interviews depending on which language they felt most comfortable expressing themselves in. After interview data were collected, the interviews were translated (if in Spanish) and transcribed into English. Interviewers were provided with a script from which they would ask questions of all the interviewees. To probe further about a topic, interviewers would use a variety of methods to evoke more information from interviewees. Interviewers would use probing questions to ask about specific details, such as "Tell me more about that." In addition, interviewers sought details of who, what, when, and how for each experience described.

c. Participants

The participants in this sample originated from five Latin American countries with sixteen out of the twenty (eighty percent) participants originating in Mexico. Two others came from El Salvador and one each moved from the Dominican Republic and Ecuador (see Table 1). Despite coming from a cross section of socioeconomic circumstances, interviewees all had in common the fact that their parents moved to the United States in pursuit of more opportunity and a better life for their family. The participants have spent varying amounts of

time in the United States, with seven out of the twenty (thirty-five percent) having lived in the United States for more than five years, four (twenty percent) exactly five years, and nine (forty-five percent) less than five years. Some participants had arrived in the United States with English proficiency; others learned over their years of acculturation; a few are not proficient in English at all. Fifteen percent of the participants identified themselves as Mexican specifically, while seventy percent identified with the larger pan-ethnic identity of Hispanic or Latino. One participant, Isabel, did not identify with a Mexican, Latino or Hispanic identity; instead she identified herself as "Anglos" and felt most comfortable identifying with a White peer group. Parental education varied among participants, with fifty-five percent having less than a high school education. The highest level of education attained by any participant's parents was college (attained only by Opi's parents). The skin tone of the participants varied from the light skin color of fourteen-year-old Laura, who was from Mexico, to the dark skin of Fernandina from the Dominican Republic. Many of the participants reported using "coyotes" (illegal guides) to cross the border and faced separation from parents and family in the process. Twelve out of the twenty interviewees experienced some separation from one or both parents during their migration experience.

Table 1. Brief Description of the LAMHA Qualitative Study Participants

Pseudonym	Urban/Rural County	Gender	Age	Country of Origin	Primary language of interview	Years in the United States	Parents' Education	Two-parent family
Alex	Rural	Male	17	Mexico	English	Over 5	HS Graduate	Yes
Alonso	Rural	Male	18	Mexico	English	Over 5	Less than HS	No
Ana	Urban	Female	16	Mexico	Spanish	Under 5	Less than HS	Yes
Carlos	Urban	Male	15	El Salvador	Spanish	Under 5	Unknown	No
Chuchi	Urban	Male	16	Mexico	English	Over 5	Less than HS	Yes
David	Urban	Male	14	Mexico	English	Over 5	Less than HS	No
Droopi	Urban	Male	15	El Salvador	English	Over 5	Less than HS	No
Erica	Urban	Female	15	Mexico	Spanish	Under 5	Less than HS	Yes
Fernandina	Urban	Female	14	Dominican Republic	English	Under 5	HS Graduate	No
Isabel	Rural	Female	14	Mexico	Spanish	Equals 5	HS Graduate	Yes
Jesus	Urban	Male	14	Mexico	English	Under 5	Less than HS	No
Joey	Rural	Male	14	Mexico	Spanish	Equals 5	Less than HS	Yes
Laura	Urban	Female	14	Mexico	English	Equals 5	HS Graduate	Yes
Laura	Rural	Female	16	Mexico	Spanish	Under 5	Less than HS	Yes
Licho	Rural	Male	15	Mexico	Spanish	Equals 5	Less than HS	Yes
Luis	Rural	Male	17	Mexico	Spanish	Over 5	HS Graduate	Yes
Maria	Rural	Female	16	Mexico	Spanish	Equals 5	Less than HS	Yes
Nancy	Urban	Female	16	Mexico	English	Under 5	HS Graduate	Yes
Opi	Urban	Male	17	Mexico	English	Over 5	College Graduate	Yes
Wendy	Urban	Female	14	Ecuador	English	Under 5	HS Graduate	Yes

Notes: Parents' education is the highest education level reported by the mother or the father. Separation from parents is recorded when the parent and child lived in different countries for at least one year before the child joined the parent in the United States. Data are grouped to avoid the possibility of deductive disclosure. Adolescents chose their own pseudonyms. LAMHA = Latino Adolescent, Migration, Health and Adaptation; HS = high school.
Source: Ko & Perreira (2010)

d. Methodology

The qualitative interview data was organized and analyzed using ATLAS.ti version 5.0 software. The first stage of the data analysis was identifying common themes to categorize interview content. After reading the interviews, themes for coding were created based on how the interview data related to the schooling experiences of immigrant youths. During the second stage of analysis, the interviews were coded using the major common themes previously identified. Similar experiences of the interviewees began to emerge when comparing the interviews, and that allowed for common clusters to be made across participants. Coded interview data were grouped together to create a comprehensive picture of each theme across all of the participants. Once major themes were identified across all participants, conclusions were drawn based on the content of the interviews.

In reviewing the interview data, it became aparent that the topics of self identity, peer identity and peer relations provided the most data for use from the interviews. Consistant with previous literature, self and peer identity played a very influential role in the schooling experiences of immigrant youth and recieved much of the attention in the results section because of this. The prevalence of data collected on self and peer identities does not undermine the importance of student-teacher relationships or the importance of parent-school relationships, but rather highlights the significance and importance of the issues on immigrant schooling experiences.

Chapter 4

Results

a. Self and Peer Identification:

The experiences that immigrant youth have interacting with peers greatly affects how they construct an understanding of their social settings and plays a major role in determining how they identify themselves in relation to their peers. These immigrant youth distinguish their identities in relation to others around them and how they "fit into" the social setting. Immigrant students not only hold a self identity, but also must construct their identity through the negotiation of identifying themselves and being identified by others. The Latino youth in the LAMHA study repeatedly identified the racial, ethnic and cultural differences that they saw between themselves, other Latinos, Black students and White students. Seventeen out of the twenty participants specifically described differences in racial and ethnic identity, skin color, clothing, behavior or language between Latino, White and Black peer groups. Six participants described differences in clothing by groups; thirteen described differences by behavior of groups; twelve described differences of physical traits between the groups. Eleven of the twenty participants spoke specifically about a language barrier between themselves, peers or teachers. Only five out of the eleven who described a language barrier during their schooling experiences have been in the United States under five years. Others spoke about language ability affecting their academic success, but this was not

specific to the creation of self and peer identities. Two of the twenty participants indicated that there was no difference between Latino, White and Black students or peer groups. Other students spoke about similarities and distinctions between holidays and food. These, however, were not a part of the schooling experience. They were often events or characteristics that occurred outside of the school setting. The differences immigrant students articulated show the creation of distinctions between students through self, peer and social identification.

To the adolescents in this study, peers were distinguished as those with whom they have some form of direct association. Peers were also characterized as possessing membership to specific social groupings. The immigrant youth involved in this study made distinctions between themselves and others along ethnic, racial and cultural lines. For example, Alonso describes how the creation of social distinctions occurs with a story from his elementary school.

> When I was in elementary school, my best friend was a little White kid, you know. But I mean, he was my best friend, but then basically, when you have, it's like everything else, if you hang out with people that think sort of like the same way you think, you get a better relationship with that person. Like everything else in life, your friends, they have something in common with you, and you hang out with them basically for that reason. You all do things together that you all like to do and that's basically why.

During Alonso's elementary experience he did not notice any differences between himself and his White friend. But as he grew older he began to associate peers who have commonalities and not peers who have differences. Students explained that membership to

peer groups is exclusive and distinct. In attempting to find their peers, students had to navigate through already established group memberships.

> it's evident if you go to a school cafeteria and you'll see Blacks in one part, Hispanics in another, Whites in another, so it's rare when you see a Hispanic with an American and a Black together. It's really strange. [Carlos]

> well you know, at my school it's kind of divided. If you're Hispanic, you only talk to Hispanics; if you're White you only talk to White people. [Fernandina]

The lines of distinction between similar peers and non-similar peers were drawn clearly; however, it was not solely based on racial lines, as this lunch room scenario might infer. These distinctions can be based on cultural characteristics, racial and ethnic identity, skin color, clothing, behavior, language, perceived country of origin or openness towards others. These differences between peers represent major factors in the construction of peer groups and who "belongs" to a specific peer groups.

> People look at the different colors. People looking for different kind of cultures and not liking each other -- just finding anything that's wrong with that person -- just because they are different color, different culture, and not liking them at all. [Laura]

Native and immigrant peers actively participated in the negotiation of peer groups, in the construction of immigrant identity, and in understanding what characteristics were acceptable.

Language was a characteristic that can be both unifying and divisive. These Latino immigrants testified that their language allowed them to identify with other Hispanic youth

when they first arrived. It provided a commonality on which friendship and a peer grouping could be based.

> Well, what I mostly see is that the Hispanics stay with the Hispanics. It does not matter where they come from. The Hispanics with Hispanics. Americans don't care if you are Chinese, Japanese, Mexican, Black. Your color is not important. They will be with you if you approach them. They won't be ugly to you. The Hispanics could be this way also, but they prefer those who speak their language. I don't know why they don't go there or over there or if it's that it doesn't go well for them. And the Blacks, they stay with Blacks. [Isabel]

Language also represents a tool that can gain access to meeting other peers and social networks. The knowledge and ability to speak the English language represents a characteristic that was often needed to associate with other peer groups.

> well in an interaction, when you don't know somebody but you know how you can communicate with that person, then it makes it much easier on you to find friends, get help on something you need, and all that. I think the biggest thing you can do to adjust to living in a different place is first of all to learn the language [Alonso]

Carlos explains further,

> I've got lots of friends there. Now that I know a bit more English, I have friends – white Americans, Blacks, there's some of everything, and I get along with the majority.

The distinctions that these immigrant youth made between people and groups of people did not always have exclusionary results. Many participants expressed that they were able to be friends with everyone, regardless of race, language or other distinctions. Immigrant students were able to socialize between groups with whom they saw distinctions. The ability to associate and socialize with differing peer groups was wholly dependent on

access to a peer group and a peer group's acceptance of the cultural differences. Laura explained the differences in inclusion and exclusion this way.

> Actually, when we are speaking Spanish, the African-American people tell us to start talking English. 'You better start talking English so we can understand you!' And we are like, 'It's our language. We can't help it.' They go like, 'You are in America, and you're not in Mexico. So you need to start speaking more English and not in Spanish.'

> You can see it. I mean if you're new you don't have to know about this. You can tell it. The teachers know this. They see this. I mean the teachers assign your seating charts, but they change it like because they have problems. Like this African-American -- she's like, 'This Hispanic girl is talking behind me in Spanish, and I'm gonna smack her.' So the teachers, you know, they have to arrange everything because if not there's gonna be trouble.

Experiences with Black peers are vastly different than with White peers in Laura's school.

> Well, some they [Whites] are really sweet. They just like you the way you are. They don't care whether your parents be Mexican or whether you be born here or not. They just like you for who you are. They don't really care about your color.

The distinctions that these youth make were not entirely created by their actions, beliefs and judgments about peers. The creation of an identity in schools is a dual process of making and being made. These youths developed their own understanding of their identity through the characteristics and beliefs they hold. Similarly, their peers have developed an identity for them as a result of how they perceived these immigrant youths to be. Licho told a story about how he and a friend were viewed by a peer at school.

> I have a Honduran friend. And there are some Americans that call him 'Mexican.' No matter where you are from, as long as you are Hispanic they

> call you Mexican. And my friend gets angry all the time. He would prefer them to call him a Honduran. He doesn't like to be called Mexican. He is not against Mexicans, but he values the fact that he is Honduran and doesn't understand why they say otherwise. The Whites, yes, they do use the same word for all the Latinos. They say -an American girl asked, 'Where are you from.' I heard. And he said, 'From El Salvador.' And she said, 'Oh, you are Mexican?' 'No. El Salvador is another country below Mexico.' 'Oh, I thought you were all from Mexico.'

Isabel shared a similar story.

> Like the other day a kid, I don't know what was wrong with him, but he called me a Mexican as if to offend me. It didn't offend me because I am very proud to be that. It doesn't bother me because this is what I am, and I not going to change that. They don't bother me. If I was from Brazil, and they called me Brazilian, then I still wouldn't be offended because that is what I am. What's the problem? If I am, I can't shed that.

These interactions influenced how these Latino youth came to understand their space in American society. The creation of distinctions and the inclusion or exclusion from peer groups shaped these immigrants' assimilation experiences and understanding of what it means to be "American." These immigrant youth discussed being "American" as synonymous with being "White."

> The American way? Probably like blond hair, blue eyes, and be all, like your skirt be really short and just be talking about boys. [Laura]

> You use Whites or Americans. It's all equal. There are no differences. [Licho]

The synonymous terms with which these immigrants describe "American" as "White" establishes which peer groups possess membership to the "American" identity. The

distinctions between groups went beyond physical characteristics and deeper into what students perceived as cultural traits. These youth also discussed the development of their own "American" identities and the struggles they have had to become more completely "American."

> me being a Mexican American it's just, I'm a Mexican I was born in Mexico but I really do consider myself an American. [Alonso]

> cause I guess I consider myself more American than Hispanic because I guess, because since now you live here you kinda have to become an American person to go along with everything…cause when I go over there [Dominican Republic] I don't feel Dominican. And when I'm here then I don't feel completely American. [Fernandina]

The creation of an identity for these immigrant youth was a process of reciprocal navigation. In other words, immigrant students had to construct their own identity in direct relation to the distinct similarities and differences they saw in their peers. They were provided or denied access to specific social networks based on the cultural characteristics they possessed and the social network's desire to accept them. These immigrant youth constructed an identity by navigating their understanding of their own identity, their peers' identity and their peers' reciprocal understanding of them.

b. <u>Teacher-Student Relationship</u>

The students' relationship with teachers also greatly impacted how they viewed schooling in the United States and in their native country. When discussing teacher quality, students across the sample consistently described teachers in terms of "good" and "bad." These terms were used consistently for experiences in both the United State and in native countries. Students judged their teachers based on their perception of the relationship they

had with the teacher, the teacher's classroom management, the teacher's adaptation of curriculum for immigrant students and their perception of teachers allocating more or fewer resources to help immigrant students. Fifteen out of the twenty respondents held positive views of American teachers. These Latino youth judged their relationship with their teachers based on the amount of "help" a teacher provided for them in relation to their academic success. For example, if a teacher was caring towards students and was accepting and understanding of differences, she was highly regarded. For these students it was important that a teacher provided extra help, cared about the students by showing interest, allowed students to express themselves in different ways and understood the differences and difficulties that Latino students exhibited. Of the fifteen respondents who held positive views of their teachers, six were male. Interestingly, all nine females in the sample expressed positive perceptions of their teachers. Only two out of twenty participants expressed negative views of teachers. While only a small portion of the sample, the negative students are important here because their experiences may well reflect a much broader theme of negative immigrant experiences due to issues of language and adaptation to student differences.

Showing concern was one way immigrant students identified a "good" teacher. Erica explained her experience with good teachers. She elaborated on what makes teachers in the United States "good" teachers in comparison to other teachers.

> 'The teachers are so better here... if I have a question they [teachers] have me go up. They say, "Come on over here and let me explain.' They explain more here [in the USA]--the problems and all--much more calmly.

Despite not excelling at school and saying that school in Mexico was nicer than school in the United States, Maria explained that she saw a good teacher as one who is willing to help with the difficulties that students faced. Similarly, Maria described her English as a Second Language teacher by saying, "She was the one that treated me well at school. Whatever problem I had she always helped me with everything." Isabel also believed that the teachers cared and provided extra help regardless of their thoughts on her academic motivation: "I believe the teachers really tried. They did extra to help me. However, because I sat alone, or like that, they thought I didn't want to learn." These Latino youth also categorized teachers as good because they understood variation between students and the difficulties that struggling students face. Such teachers were perceived by immigrant students to offer more help than other teachers and to have a genuine concern for the students' well-being and academic success. In addition, teachers who make specific changes in class to meet the needs of immigrant students and to support their academic success were perceived as good teachers.

> The teacher [in the USA] was really good, a good person with everyone. She understood you, that the differences like, between the Hispanics and the Whites. And she tried to explain more because many times they didn't understand me because I don't speak the language very well. And she explained a lot to us. [Laura]

In contract to "good" teachers, immigrant students described "bad" teachers and teachers they did not like in terms of negative personal relationships with the teachers and negative experiences that they had had. Two students said their negative relationships with teachers were due to teachers possessing negative opinions of Hispanics. Ironically, the reasons for negative perceptions were in direct opposition to positive perceptions: "I am

cared for" versus "I am not liked." Also, language as a barrier was a common theme in negative opinions about self and peer identities as well as parental involvement. The native language was used by most Latino immigrants to help them adapt to a new classroom environment and improve understanding. However, when a teacher did not allow any Spanish to be spoken in the classroom, conflict became inevitable.

> I was speaking Spanish to one of my friends, and she came over to us and she was like 'you will not speak Spanish in my class, all I want to do is hear you talk English' and I told her well 'that's the best way that I can communicate with her' you know. So yeah, some teachers are a little hateful towards us Hispanics. Some are nice, now, some, not all, some are very nice. I don't really have a good relationship with most of my teachers [Alex]

As mentioned before, teachers who adapt their curriculum, classroom practices and instructional methods to meet the needs of students are seen as "good" teachers. Teachers who rigidly adhere to American norms and impose them lock-step on an immigrant student, are sure to be met with resistance and displeasure.

> Yeah, she [English teacher in the USA] was a pain, if you didn't do it her way, she was really close minded, if you didn't do it her way, she was by the rules, by the books, straight out. If you didn't do it my way, it didn't matter if it was the same thing, if you get to the same subject, only with a different road, no, it has to be this way or it's wrong. [Opi]

Immigrant students' constructions of "good teachers" and "bad teachers" were directly proportional to the quality of their experience and personal relationship. These personal experiences and relationships between students, teachers and schools greatly influenced their judgments, beliefs and feelings. The immigrant youth who participated in the LAMHA project experienced peers, schools and teachers in distinctive and unique ways.

They were shaped by their personal histories, including their experiences immigrating to the United States. How these immigrant youth interpreted and understood their experiences was important for successful, positive teacher-student relationships.

c. Parent–School Relationship

The complex relationships between students, peers and teachers were not the only relationships that impacted immigrant youths' experience of schooling. The relationships that parents had with teachers and the involvement they had with schools could also affect a student's schooling experience. Across the study students indicated that family networks were important for both cultural maintenance and for support during the migration experience. Thirteen of the twenty participants indicated that family support and unity was very important to them. Five students mentioned parental involvement with schools, and of these, all five said that education and school was important to their parents. Participants indicated that their parents wished to be involved with their education, but obstacles inhibited their ability to participate. Four out of the five stated that work was often is a factor determining parent's ability to be involved in students' schooling. Three out of the five indicated that language was a problem for parental comprehension during parent-teacher conferences or created translation problems when official documents were sent home. "Family" for these immigrant youth provided the environment, the motivation, and the resources for them to find academic and social success in the United States.

The students in the LAMHA study conveyed the idea that familial networks were very close, and they placed a high value on the importance of family, who impacted their lives greatly and were a major influence on them.

> We were very very united. I mean, You know like here if you are 18 you can just go anywhere you want to. There, NO. Until you got married you have to have- your house. Not because of your parents make you--but because you were taught as a little kid to do that. [Laura]

The familial network represented a support structure that these students use and rely on. Families provided students with resources, help and encouragement to succeed academically, socially and economically.

> I really feel supported by them [Parents]. They have never told me to not do anything like 'don't play soccer because it is not worth it.' 'If you want to play soccer then go ahead. If you can't earn money from soccer then maybe you want to try other things, but even if you can't make money doing it and you really like it, then continue.' [Licho]

The involvement and relationship of families with students' teachers and schools had the potential to significantly impact a student's educational aspirations and achievement. These immigrant students indicated that their parents valued education highly, but there were often barriers that limited their ability to be involved with their children's education. Licho described the difference between his parent's involvement in Mexico and in the United States.

> [In Mexico] They were very involved. Since we were there all day long for five days they had to be involved. They visited us. The school wanted them to visit us. They were totally involved with us. You know that five long days separated from your parents can make you really miss your parents. There were reunions every week with the parents or every fifteen weeks we celebrated the parents. They were planning sessions for things like Mother's Day plans, parent's day, events, everything. The school was, you know, it was the parents that ran the school. Our parents paid a quota to maintain the school.

> [In USA] mmmm...it depends on their work. If their work allows it then they

are involved with school.

Work is an obstacle for parental involvement that is experienced by many immigrant families. Immigration from their native land is motivated largely for socioeconomic gain, and gainful employment is the primary economic engine for all families. For immigrant youth, parental involvement in their children's school and education is hugely dependent on issues surrounding work and language.

> Before they didn't go. They really weren't involved. However, now that I am a senior they go to everything. They keep up with all I need to evaluate me. I take them since they don't know English. And I explain everything while we are there. Before when there was 'open house'--no they never went. There were meetings only for parents, and since they didn't have an interpreter they wouldn't go. However, they did go to my ESL class because the teacher spoke Spanish and was able explain everything. And now that my mom is starting to learn more English she is getting more involved. She understands more. When I tell her that there is an Open House she makes sure that she doesn't work that day. And I take her and we talk with the teachers. [Erica]

These immigrant youth indicated that children often served to facilitate parental involvement; they would often act as the translators for the interaction between teachers and parents. The use of students as translators provided parents who had not mastered English with resources that schools could not provide and helped facilitate parental involvement in the school and education system.

> Well, yes, for example in this next semester we are going to have orientations. And my mom will go. My dad can't because he works in the evening. But my mom, always. It is not important when. My mom is always there. If it is for an hour she is there for the whole hour and she goes to see ALL of the teachers. Even though she can't speak with them I translate. And, I don't know, I can't lie to my mom. If the teacher is saying one thing I can't tell her something else because then I will be robbing myself, and therefore lying to myself as well. I would feel bad. I can't say, 'Yes, she's trying to tell you to

> have a great day.' If that's not what she wants. Then they would say, 'Why don't you help your mom?' [Isabel]

However, students were only able to serve as translators if they were proficient in English. The lack of English language skills created barriers between students not only in their identification with peers but also in their ability to access the resources that the schools had to offer for them and their parents. As English proficiency increased, students and parents were more able to become involved with the school services, and parents became more involved with their children's school lives.

> Because I really wasn't able to interpret then because I didn't know English either. If I knew English then I would have gone with her. Now I do know more and so does she. If she doesn't know how to answer the teachers I would be able to say. I had to enter first, and then my mom could get involved. If my mom has questions I would start for her. If we have to see the director or my counselor to talk about what I need to succeed I go with my mom. [Erica]

The interaction that parents have with their children's schools and teachers often is not a determination of immigrant parents' desire, or lack of desire, to be involved in their child's education. Immigrant parents often care greatly about their child's education and value its importance as a tool for socioeconomic mobility, but they often do not possess the language, time or financial resources necessary to participate effectively. The burden of not having these resources, however, could be eased through reliance on translators and use of familial networks, thereby allowing parents to become more involved in the education of their children.

Chapter 5

Discussion

The distinction between peers and peer groups articulated by the youth in this study shows how bright boundaries get created through the use of exclusion criteria for students who do not possess certain characteristics. Traits such as race, ethnicity, skin tone, language, behavior and clothing have become symbolic boundaries that mark "cultural citizenship" and provide peer group membership to some students but not others. The creation of symbolic boundaries by peers and peer groups makes the process of cultural assimilation difficult for immigrant students. The symbolic boundaries expressed in the experiences of the immigrant Latino youth in this study detail the dual process of "self-making" and "being-made." These immigrant youth constructed identities through negotiation between their own personal cultural, involving ethnic and racial identification, and the reciprocal persuasions found in how their peers identified them. In short, the construction of ethnic, cultural and racial identity reflects a co-dependent relationship between self and peer identities.

Students' relationships with teachers tend to support the previous literature. In short, positive views by participants indicated that effective collaboration with teachers and adaptations to the differing needs of Latino immigrant students provided positive academic experiences and academic engagement. In contrast, experiences of perceived discrimination tended to provide negative academic experiences for these Latino Immigrant students. The

relationships between students and teachers carry many of the same themes as the relationships between immigrant students and their peers. The distinctions between Latino immigrant students, peers and teachers again can cause "bright" or "blurred" boundaries of distinction. The relationships between students and teachers are indicative of the co-dependent relationships that exist in schools. Students' abilities to have successful, positive relationships and academic experiences with their teachers are not only dependent on their own actions and perceptions, but the actions and perceptions of the teacher.

The experiences of parental involvement and family network support in this study are consistent with that of previous literature. The importance of familial network to first-generation immigrant students as a support system as well as participants' expressions of difference in family value between themselves and native-born students is consistent with research findings in other geographic locations. The barriers to parental involvement in this study, work and language, are also consistent with the findings of previous research. Parents' capacity for involvement is heavily dictated, not by their desire for involvement, but by factors determining their ability relationship with the school. The parent-school relationships are also co-dependent, not only on parental desire to be involved, but also the school's willingness to accommodate parental involvement. Schools place parents distinctively as outsiders when they do not provide translators and accommodate work schedules, for parent. This highlights that schools are necessary partners in another co-dependent relationship in which the ability of one member is limited and dictated by the other.

Immigrant students and parents do not necessarily come to the United States

understanding the history of issues of race in the United States. They construct their understanding through their experiences. Schools are the primary institution in which immigrant students learn how race, ethnicity and cultural differences are interpreted and treated by others. Much of immigrant students' schooling experiences are comprised of their relationship with, and to, others. This study examines a number of relationships including those between Latino adolescent immigrants and their peers, their teachers, as well as their parents' relationship with the school. These three relationships are largely the means by which all students experience schools. Students' experiences in schools are governed through the co-dependent relationships between, self-peers, student-teacher, as well as parent-school. These co-dependent relationships are not mediated by the actions of just one side of the relationship, but are understood through reciprocal negotiations of each other.

A common trend which highlights the co-dependent nature of all three relationships experienced by these students is the importance of language ability. Language was either a divisive barrier and source of tension and difference between immigrant students and their peers or something that allowed students access to different peers and peer groups; it was also a source of discrimination and barrier to positive relationships with teachers or was accommodated for through adaptation. Language was also a limitation for parents to effectively communicate with the school and teachers of their children, unless accommodations were made to negate the language barrier.

The schooling experiences for immigrant youth are not solely academic functions. The experiences and daily interactions between students, peers, teachers, parents and schools create the framework within which immigrant students construct their understanding of

American society and how they fit “in,” or “outside” of, American society. The experiences of the immigrant youth in this study illustrate the importance of co-dependent relationships in their schooling experiences.

Chapter 6

Conclusion

Much of immigrant experiences during their schooling are tied to the identification of cultural characteristics, racial and ethnic identity, skin color, clothing, behavior, language or perceived country of origin. Whether mediated through identity and membership to specific social groups or discrimination from teachers or the ability of parents to communicate, interactions and experiences of immigrant students and families are often dictated by differing cultural characteristics. Students regularly have to deal with issues of race or language when interacting with peers and teachers. The cultural distinctions between immigrant students and "American" born students are at the forefront of the interactions these students have.

These cultural distinctions carry over into the relationships that students have with teachers. Students perceive their teacher quality by the teachers' responsiveness to the cultural distinctions they have. Teachers who are accommodating and adapt to the differences of Latino immigrant students develop better relationships with these immigrant students, provide positive academic experiences and encouragement and are seen as "good" teachers by the students. Teachers who are not accommodating to differences such as language cause these immigrant students negative academic experiences, discouraging them from academic success and are seen as "bad" teachers.

Family networks are valuable to immigrant students in their post-migration schooling experiences. The participants in this study indicated that family was important to them and they value the close family networks they have. Family plays an important role as a support system in academic, social and extracurricular endeavors of students. Parents value education, believing it is important for their children to do well in school and wish to be involved with their children's education even if barriers exist which limit their involvement.

This study was limited in several respects. First, the LAMHA study's main purpose was not to examine the schooling experiences of Latino adolescent immigrants. It was to examine acculturation experiences in general. While many of these experiences relate to schooling experiences, future research could probe additional aspects of the schooling experience more directly. Specifically how racial and ethnic identities develop and change over time and how smaller ethnic and racial minority groups view racial identities and peer groups.

This study focused exclusively on adolescent first-generation immigrant students. With the population of elementary age Latino children changing by becoming less first-generation children and increasingly second-generation (i.e. native-born children of foreign-born parents) children the opportunity for research into this population is expanding. Much research has been conducted on adolescent and high school age Latino students; however there is a need for increased research of elementary age first- and second-generation immigrant students.

In addition, many participants expressed interest in returning to Mexico for various reasons, to live or to visit family. Future research could also examine how these ties to

multiple places affect the development of students' national, ethnic or cultural identities. Second, this analysis did not make use of the available survey data for the LAMHA study. Future research could take advantage of the available survey data to provide additional insights into schooling experiences of youth.

This study's examination of Latino youths' experiences in North Carolina schools is significant in multiple areas. The process of identity formation that immigrants experience while being schooled in the United States is essential to ensuring that immigrant students succeed academically as well as socially. The factors contributing to the understanding of their identities, as well as their relationships with peers, teachers and schools, improve our understanding of immigrant students' experiences in American schools. In order for immigrant students to be effectively educated, boundaries established in key institutions, such as schools, must first be deconstructed.

Appendix A:

INTERVIEW CHECKLIST

Instructions: *The key to a good interview is knowing what we want to understand. You do not need to ask questions exactly as they are written below or in the order that they are written below. You should know the interview topics well enough so that you can pay attention to your respondent and not look at the questionnaire. All you will need is this checklist and the sheet with ethnic labels.*

PRE-MIGRATION EXPERIENCE

- Family Life like ☐
- Typical day ☐
- Most liked/least liked ☐

MIGRATION EXPERIENCE

- Decision Process ☐
- Adolescent Involvement ☐
- Motivations to move to NC ☐
- The Journey ☐

POST-MIGRATION EXPERIENCE

- Family Life like ☐
- Typical day ☐
- Most liked/least liked ☐
- Keeping in contact with family/friends in Mexico ☐
- School Experience ☐

ETHNIC IDENTITY

- Describe yourself ☐
- Best label for you ☐
- Meaning of best label, likes/dislikes ☐
- Meaning of African-American ☐
- Meaning of White-American ☐
- Differential treatment ☐
- Avoiding differential treatment ☐
- Acting American/white ☐

ACCULTURATION

- Family traditions ☐
- Connections/Attachment to Mexico ☐
- Changes in self ☐
- Gender Roles ☐
- Religion ☐
- Agreement/disagreements with parents ☐

CLOSING

- Advice to kids/parents ☐

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